# How Christians Started the Ivy League › The Forerunner

Dr. Francis Schaeffer

Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth – all owe their origins to the gospel.

Probably no segment of American society has turned out a greater number of illustrious graduates than New England's Ivy League. Labels like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, still carry their own mystique and a certain aura of elitism and prestige.

Yet perhaps it would surprise most to learn that almost every Ivy League school was established primarily to train ministers of the gospel – and to evangelize the Atlantic seaboard.

**Harvard, 1638**

It only took eighteen years from the time the Pilgrims set foot on Plymouth Rock until the Puritans, who were among the most educated people of their day, founded the first and perhaps most famous Ivy League school. Their story, in brief, is etched today in an entry way to Harvard Yard:

"After God had carried us safely to New England, and we had built our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government; one of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance learning, and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust."

Harvard College's first presidents and tutors insisted that there could be no true knowledge or wisdom without Jesus Christ, and but for their passionate Christian convictions, there would have been no Harvard.

Harvard's "Rules and Precepts adopted in 1646 included the following essentials: "Every one shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life. Seeing the Lord giveth wisdom, every one shall seriously by prayer in secret seek wisdom of Him. Every one shall so exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day that they be ready to give an account

of their proficiency therein, both in theoretical observations of languages and logic, and in practical and spiritual truths….”

According to reliable calculations, 52 percent of the 17th century Harvard graduates became ministers!

**Yale, 1701**

By the turn of the century Christians in the Connecticut region launched Yale as an alternative to Harvard. Many thought Harvard too far away and too expensive, and they also observed that the spiritual climate at Harvard was not what it once had been.

**Princeton, 1746**

This school, originally called “The College of New Jersey,” sprang up in part from the impact of the First Great Awakening. It also retained its evangelical vigor longer than any other Ivy League school. In fact, Princeton’s presidents were evangelical until at least the turn of the Twentieth Century, as also many of the faculty.

**Dartmouth, 1754**

A strong missionary thrust launched this new school in New Hampshire. Its royal charter, signed by King George of England, specified the school’s intent to reach the Indian tribes, and to educate and Christianize English youth as well. Eleazar Wheelock, a close friend of evangelist George Whitefield, secured the charter.

**Columbia, William and Mary, Rutgers, Brown & UPenn**

The first president of New York’s Columbia University, first known as “King’s College,” at one time served as a missionary to America under the English-based “Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.” The Church of England established the College of William and Mary, near today’s colonial Williamsburg. Dutch Reformed revivalists founded Queen’s College (later Rutgers University) in New Jersey. Brown University originated with the Baptist churches scattered on the Atlantic seaboard. With the exception of the University of Pennsylvania, every collegiate institution founded in the colonies prior to the Revolutionary War was established by some branch of the Christian Church.

Even at UPenn, however, an evangelist played a prominent part. When Philadelphia churches denied revivalist George Whitefield access to their pulpits,

forcing him to preach in the open, some of Whitefield's admirers, among them Benjamin Franklin, decided to erect a building to accommodate the great crowds that wanted to hear him. The structure they built became the first building of what is now the University of Pennsylvania, and a statue of Whitefield stands prominently on that campus today.

Though the Ivy League schools eventually turned secular, they fed into the mainstream of society in those earlier days a great army of graduates who could claim Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord, and who left a strong impact on our nation. Their presidents and their faculties helped to set a high spiritual tone, and at times their campuses in turn felt the impact of revival. The educators of early America understood that the moral climate of its schools, colleges and universities would shape its future generations, and could ultimately decide the course of the nation.

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See also: The Boston Awakening

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